

# INTERPRETATION AND AUTHORITY

*James Kirwan*

An indispensable guide is a useless guide.

This paper will be concerned with illustrating the truth of the preceding paradox. But first, why 'interpretation and authority'? At first sight they appear to belong to antithetical domains, and I will endeavour in what follows to show that this impression is in fact the most reliable. But in order to do so I must first bring the definition of interpretation to that point where the two terms become so intertwined that they appear almost identical.

When does interpretation take place? What kind of situations require interpretation? Those in which I cannot account for a phenomenon (the presence of a word, the "suicide" of lemming) by what I know at moment when the phenomenon is presented to me, that is, those in which a hiatus is created in my existing understanding of the world. It is coherence itself which interpretation aims at, and this is preserved only by the coherence of language. A coherence between propositions does not, of course, guarantee that any of them are true, but it is coherence rather than truth which is the measure of interpretation. An absolute guarantee of truth, with respect to any specific instance, is just what we cannot have — we cannot know more than 'the current state of science' (or history), and how that current state can alter *within the limits of the logical possibilities of language*. Indeed if we were to make truthfulness a necessary condition of interpretation we would at once deprive ourselves of the power to designate any process by the name 'interpretation'.

The temptation here is to confuse the letter with the language. When I speak of language as the precondition of understanding this 'language' must be understood as 'that which can be construed in letters' rather than these letters themselves. This 'language' determines understanding but I

cannot reflectively say that I am determined by it, for this is not a matter of alternatives; to be conscious of the determination of the logical possibilities of language would be the equivalent to lifting oneself by one's own boot laces. Language as discourse or genre can be meaningfully described as deterministic, in that, in any specific instance, it may preclude certain alternatives, but this presupposes that these alternatives are possible. Thus I cannot refer to *x* in English by a single word, as I might perhaps be able to in another language. However, if *x* can be referred to in any language (Japanese, a diagram, whatever), then I am free to refer to it simply by learning this other language. Moreover I can learn this other language only because that word which refers to *x* in this language already exists as a possibility in my present language — is part of that language as a gap. In other words, a word for *x* is a possibility in both languages because of what they have in common, because they are both language.

The individual discourse, or language, must be rooted in language or in consistent deviations from language (by which consistency they revert to language) in order to be understandable, to convey meaning, to be language. That a language can be translated, then, is the condition of its being a language — a system of ordering that can be represented in some other way. It is not necessary that this medium which individual languages must have in common in order to be languages, this language per se, should be capable of being itself validated, rather it exists simply as the possibility of translation.

It is not, then, the genre any more than the text within the genre, or the sentence within the text, that is 'given' in the sense that there must be a given context for understanding to be possible at all. What the notion of the hermeneutic circle (the paradox that, while the part must be understood from the whole, the whole can only be understood from the parts) represents is the fact that in certain specific instances it is the meaning of the context (sentence, text, discourse), its categorematic role in determining the meaning of the element, that must become the object of interpretation, that must be taken as syncategorematic. This suspension of the determining role of the context is possible only because there

is a context of the context, as much in the case of the discourse as in the case of the sentence. So why not a context for the logical possibilities of language? Scepticism is, of course, only possible where certainty is also possible, it requires that my questioning be itself meaningful. But this 'meaningful' already reveals the necessary impossibility of questioning the logical possibilities of language, for it presupposes them.

The common medium, then, is not every instance of language as it is given, but rather the possibilities of language. For this reason the recognition of language per se as the basis of understanding is not deterministic in any meaningful way, that is, does not evoke the hermeneutic circle. There are lacunae in the connection between the common medium and the sum of language, of discourses, that is, there is the possibility of new meaning, at every level, because those levels are syncategorematic — they do not, and cannot, reproduce that which gives them meaning. So that within any discourse there can be a dissension from the intention that is objectified in that discourse — from that which is merely previously unfamiliar to me, but which is part of the discourse as already constituted, to that which actually alters the discourse itself, causes part or even the whole of the discourse to lose its reference (the discourse of chemistry's rejection of the discourse of phlogiston which was once constitutive of it) — but always on the basis of the whole beyond the discourse, that is reference to a meaningfulness that is preserved by coherence per se and which is only available to us through the coherence of language.

This basing of interpretation upon coherence, upon the agnosticism of the logical possibilities of language, does not, then, mean that interpretation is indefinitely postponed or that we must call every interpretation a partial or provisional interpretation, for an interpretation is anything that establishes a coherence within a group of given phenomena. Thus the principle of the exclusion of the expletive does not, and cannot hope to, encompass what is unknown either with regard to the context of some specific instance, or, what is in one sense the same thing, the world as it will finally turn out to be.

But if interpretation's deference to 'what is known' cannot be meaningfully described as determinism, since it does not preclude the possibility of the new, is there not a sense in which this deference turns almost all interpretation into an appeal to authority? There is very little of our knowledge, after all, which we have at 'first hand'. The contrast is often made between two types of judgement that can be made within interpretation — 'intuitive' and 'discursive'. If we wish to present only truth and avoid premature judgements, asserts one form of scepticism, then we must present only intuitive judgements, that is, only that which we have perceived through mere attentiveness. With history, for example, we would present only such propositions as, had we been present at the time, we would have come to know through mere attentiveness. But how do I verify that I would have come to this judgement at time T, if time T itself is no longer present to attention? For this idea of 'mere attentiveness' can only have an identity by virtue of the contrast between immediate presence and report. This 'intuitive/discursive' distinction will not, then, solve the problem of the division between interpretation and misinterpretation (or overinterpretation) but rather itself simply points to the impossibility of drawing a distinction in this form. For we do not say, in ordinary language, that what is simply present to our attention is a matter of interpretation at all. If anything more than this is misinterpretation, where is that area in which the possibility of interpretation or misinterpretation can exist? Of course, immediate presence need not itself guarantee knowledge. Take Descartes;

Everything I have accepted up to now as being absolutely true and assured, I have learned from or through the senses. But I have sometimes found that these senses played me false, and it is prudent never to trust entirely those who have once deceived us. (*Meditations* I)

Except, of course, that it is only through his senses that Descartes has discovered those occasions on which his senses have played him false. I no longer climb trees to disentangle the moon from their branches because now when I see the moon behind a tree that is what I see — an astronomical body between which and myself there is a tree. There is, then, more to mere attentiveness than the present, or rather what consti-

tutes the presence of a phenomenon to me is always something more than the state of my senses taken at its most primitive. (Hence optical illusions, whereby the 'interpretative' nature of the senses is revealed by demonstrating the ways in which it is hidden from us; as in the case of Ames' distorted room.)

Attentiveness, then, is always tested against a wider context of attentiveness, and this fact should guide us towards discovering the difference between knowledge by report and appeal to authority, that is, towards finding the true nature of the relationship between interpretation and authority. I know of Australia only by report, yet I nevertheless speak of 'knowing' of Australia because, from past experience, I can see no reason why it should not exist, that is, *as far as I know* there are many strong arguments for its existence and none against its existence. It is thus the same deference to coherence that I employ in the matter of believing in the existence of Australia as I employ in believing that the legs of this table upon which I am writing, though out of sight, are still there. If there is such a thing as a deference to authority it must then be something different from deference to report, for I can be no more said to 'trust' in the authority of reports about Australia than I can be said to 'trust' in the existence of my feet. Mere attentiveness is as applicable to Australia as to any other phenomena, because this attentiveness is an attentiveness to the coherence of the whole, and the same parameters of faith and scepticism that hold for my knowledge that this is Suzurandai and not an illusion foisted on me by some Cartesian demon, also hold for my knowledge that there is an Australia. In neither case is there sufficient doubt to express itself in a difference in behaviour. (The same pragmatic standard applies equally to whether I can trust even my own senses.)

Whence, then, the concept of authority as distinct from report? We speak of the 'authority' of a report, meaning thereby that it comes from a source which, in the past, has provided us with reliable information. 'Authority' in this sense simply refers to the role which any particular human institution, existing as a separate entity, plays within interpretation, though, with regard to interpretation it has no discrete existence, no in-

trinsically privileged position beyond interpretation itself. Such 'authority' is invested by ourselves, on the basis of coherence, and is thus not equivalent to that 'authority' for which we are seeking, that is, that *particular* source of propositions which we believe solely on the basis of their origin. This latter form of authority is a form of prejudice, for it can be said to exist only where we believe something irrespective of the coherence of the whole — whether in contradiction to this coherence or simply irrespective of sufficient proof to make coming to any conclusion justifiable. 'Authority' in this sense is likewise invested by the self but in this case the investiture is absolute; it is prejudice in favour of a source of knowledge.

Interpretation, then, does not 'defer' to authority, since if it is interpretation that is taking place, that is, a seeking after the coherence of the whole, this 'authority' is just as much subject to interpretation as any other phenomenon. Authority determines interpretation, that is, is distinct from interpretation and exists as authority in an absolute sense, only in specific instances where the interpretative process is suspended. Suspended not because one has found a coherence, but because one is no longer concerned with coherence, because one has chosen not to interpret what still demands interpretation.

Thus we return to the paradox with which I began : An indispensable guide is a useless guide. An indispensable guide is one that tells us what cannot be verified by any other means. But what can such a guide be a guide to?